

The Politics of Traveller 'Child Begging' in Ireland

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Abstract ■ Prompted by legislative reform with respect to 'child begging' in the Irish Children Act 2001, this article examines the history and politics of 'child begging' and other children's work among the minority population of Travelling People in Ireland. Increased official focus on Traveller 'child begging' in the 1990s, and an attempt on the part of Traveller advocates to defend related children's work from criminalization, is located within the context of economic growth, social inequality, and struggles over cultural and children's rights.

Keywords ■ begging ■ childhood ■ Ireland ■ Travelling People ■ work

Prompted by legislative reform with respect to 'child begging' in the Irish Children Act 2001, this article examines the history and politics of child begging and other children's work among the minority population of Travelling People in Ireland. Of particular interest is the challenge to aspects of the Children Act that was mounted by Pavee Point, a Traveller advocacy group. (Pavee Point argued that the legislation's broad definition of 'child begging' criminalized a wide range of traditional Traveller children's economic activities and thereby threatened Traveller culture and economy.) While the challenge was ultimately unsuccessful, it pointed to the ongoing importance of children's economic activities for many Traveller families, and the need to distinguish between harmful and safe forms of children's work.

In this article I locate contemporary struggles over 'child begging' within a longer history of Traveller children's work and anti-Traveller official discourse and practice. I then outline the ways in which an intensified official concern with Traveller 'child begging' has become linked to debates over Traveller cultural rights. In particular, I argue that the phenomenon of Traveller (and increasingly Roma) 'child begging' has become emblematic of an alleged incompatibility of cultural and children's rights in Ireland. This framing of the issue, however, deflects attention from the elite economic interests that fuel intensified efforts at 'begging governance' while simultaneously denying the economic

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significance of begging as a form of poor children's work. The phenomenon of child begging is a symptom of the social inequalities that characterize the Irish 'Celtic Tiger'.

Children's work

Childhood, as a socially and culturally shaped category, has become increasingly contested in the current era of restructuring in a globalizing world. Scholarly attention has begun to focus on the ways children are directly implicated in changing local, national and globalized political economies. This increased attention has given rise to a growing interdisciplinary 'childhood studies' (James et al., 1998) as well as a reinvigorated anthropology of childhood (Scheper-Hughes and Sargent, 1998; Stephens, 1995).

Increased scholarly and political interest in the phenomenon of children's work in particular can be linked to the paradoxes of globalization. On the one hand, for example, neo-liberal economic processes and state policies have maintained if not increased both supply and demand for child workers (Galley, 1999; Nieuwenhuys, 1994, 1996). On the other hand, the campaign against child labour has been given impetus by its location within an increasingly globalized children's rights movement.¹

While much of the international debate remains focused on child workers in the South, and especially those working in export industries, there has been increased recognition of the pervasiveness of children's paid employment in Europe and North America, especially for school-aged 'teens' (McKee and Hobbs, 1999; Tannock, 2001). In Ireland, for example, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions reported that two-thirds of children in secondary education in Ireland were working part time in 1999 (see Caoimhghín O'Caoláin, *Dáil Debates*, 5 April 2000: col. 709).

The literature on children's work not only increasingly encompasses both North and South, it has also broadened the scope to include activities outside paid employment. The ways in which children participate in a wide variety of economic activities outside conventional wage work (for example, their contributions to various family-based agricultural or trading enterprises, domestic labour and/or child care) is receiving growing attention from scholars and policy makers (Myers, 1999). A sense of the broadened understanding of what constitutes children's work is well illustrated by Kenny who, in her study of child labour in Northeast Brazil, defines children's work as 'any activity done by children which either contributes to production, gives adults free time, facilitates the work of others, or substitutes for the employment of others' (Kenny, 1999: 376, citing Schildkrout, 1981). Such an approach is important to an analysis of the wide range of activities engaged in by minority Irish Traveller children both past and present – including those currently labelled as 'child begging'.

Traveller childhood and children's work in Ireland

The indigenous Irish minority group of Travelling People number over 25,000 within the Republic, with significant additional numbers in Britain. Despite a long-standing state policy of accommodation provision, approximately one-quarter of Traveller families are living in trailers in unauthorized and unserviced camps without basic services such as running water, electricity and sanitation. While new anti-discrimination legislation is beginning to provide avenues for redress, Travellers continue to experience pervasive everyday and systematic racism. Poverty rates are disproportionately high, while basic indices of health such as infant mortality and life expectancy reveal dramatic disparities vis-a-vis the rest of the Irish population.

In previous work I have outlined the centrality of children to minority Traveller-related debate and practice in Ireland (Helleiner, 1998a, 1998b). A settlement policy aimed at Travelling People in the 1960s, for example, relied heavily upon the claim that Traveller children would be the primary beneficiaries of assimilation through settlement in housing and full-time school attendance. This claim relied upon the premise that itinerancy was inherently harmful to children and that Traveller parental inadequacy necessitated outside state/voluntary intervention aimed at 'child saving'. Children have continued to be a central site of struggles over Traveller policy and implementation as dominant constructions continue to portray Traveller children as problematically deviating from an ideal childhood with mobility and/or trailer-living in particular being linked directly or indirectly to indices of child deprivation (e.g. high infant mortality rates and limited enrolment in post-primary education).

Of interest here is that while a Traveller way of life that includes mobility and/or camping continues to be problematized, other distinctive aspects of Traveller childhood have received less attention. One of the aspects of Traveller childhood that has attracted little commentary is children's often significant economic contributions to household economies. With the exception of the highly problematized 'begging', Traveller children's work activities have been virtually invisible in dominant discourse. The lack of recognition of the range of Traveller children's work, and its economic significance, has meant the loss of an opportunity to grapple with its implications for Traveller-related policy and practice. There has been little recognition, for example, of the ways in which Traveller children's working activities and economic contributions might impact upon school attendance/completion and vice versa. Similarly, the interaction between the economic importance of children and relatively high fertility rates is rarely acknowledged.²

Understanding the significance of Traveller children's activities (and the persistence of a Traveller economy more generally) requires a broad understanding of 'work'. The Traveller economy in the past and present has been marked by a flexible multi-occupationality operating primarily but

not exclusively in the informal sector. Households have characteristically relied upon a range of income-generating as well as non-income-generating forms of work performed by men, women and children. Outsider accounts, however, have often focused almost exclusively on particular activities of Traveller men, neglecting both the range and flexibility of adult male Traveller work activities, and the extensive contributions of women and children.

One result has been a recurrent claim that the disappearance of certain male trades, for example, tinsmithing, has eroded the economic base for a Traveller way of life. The resilience of a distinctive Traveller economy, however, points to the significance of a flexible multioccupationality as well as the participation of all household members, whether men, women or children.

As I have noted previously (Helleiner, 1998a, 1998b, 2000), published autobiographical accounts of Traveller life from the 1920s onward reveal how Traveller children were involved in the social reproduction of their families and wider residential clusters (see Court, 1985; Gmelch, 1986; Joyce and Farmar, 1985; Maher, 1972; Pavee Point, 1992; Sandford, 1975). These sources reveal that from infancy Traveller children were brought along on house-to-house peddling and hawking expeditions. The doorstep exchange of goods and services with non-Travellers could involve cash, forms of barter and sometimes 'begging' (see also Gmelch and Gmelch, 1978).

Traveller children became important income-earners in their own right at a young age by selling tinware, swapping horses and collecting rags, bottles and jars, scrap and other recyclable items from the non-Traveller population. Traveller children also provided entertainment (e.g. singing in pubs) to settled audiences, and were part of family groups that had occasional employment as farmworkers. Along with these forms of income-generating activities, published accounts also include references to children being involved in subsistence activities such as hunting and fishing.

Older children, and especially older girls, made essential contributions to their own and neighbouring (often related) families in the area of child care and domestic labour. Traveller author Nán Joyce described how older girls were 'never really free' because of their child care responsibilities, adding that: 'Since you were nine or ten you were holding the youngest child in your arms' (Joyce and Farmar, 1985: 16). Bridget Murphy (born in the early 1930s) described in a published oral narrative how from the age of 10 she was washing, baking and keeping the caravan clean while her mother was off peddling (Court, 1985: 72-3; see also Pavee Point, 1992: 44-5). Traveller children were then involved in a range of activities, which supported their respective household enterprises.

(While the settlement policies and programmes introduced in the 1960s have included explicit attempts to bring adult (and especially male)

Travellers into conventional wage labour and Traveller children into full-time schooling, Traveller children have continued to participate in a wide range of activities in the informal sector including, in some cases, activities labelled as 'begging'.

The ethnographic research of George and Sharon Gmelch (1978), conducted among Dublin Travellers in the early 1970s, found that both women (the focus of their discussion) and children were involved in house-to-house and street begging. In some cases, younger children, and especially babies, were brought along by adult women. Young children or infants, they suggest, were seen as assets by adult women because of their capacity to evoke compassion in potential donors. The Gmelches also noted the more independent begging activities of teenaged girls and some boys at this time. They concluded that, with greater urbanization, Travellers were experiencing a contraction of many male traditional trades and services, and the expansion of begging opportunities. The result, they suggested, was an increase in the relative economic contributions of women and children to their respective households in the early 1970s (G. Gmelch, 1977; Gmelch and Gmelch, 1978).

During my own fieldwork in Galway City in 1986/7, Traveller children combined intermittent schooling with involvement in a variety of informal income-generating activities.³ Children collected recyclable items from bins and gathered 'winkles' (shellfish) at the beach for resale. Older boys assisted their fathers in scrap metal recycling and some older girls described participating in door-to-door peddling of dry goods. Some women and children were also involved in house and street begging (both together and apart), although this was not as widespread as described by Gmelch and Gmelch.

Along with these income-generating activities, older children, but especially girls, made significant contributions in the area of domestic labour (fetching water, collecting firewood, washing clothes, shopping) and child care for their own and other households. Some older youth were also involved in training schemes for which they received training allowances.

The autobiographical and ethnographic evidence suggests that, as with many other poor and/or minority populations, Traveller children's unpaid or low-paid labour has been critical to the competitiveness of their respective family enterprises because it has facilitated the offering of goods and services below their labour value (see Nieuwenhuys, 1994, 1996).

As others have commented more generally, forms of informal work characterized by mobility, flexibility and casualization appear to be integral rather than antithetical to advanced capitalism and flourished in late 20th-century Ireland (O'Hearn, 1998: 103). In the case of many Traveller families, children's informal work, moreover, continued to be an important part of ensuring household reproduction in the context of pervasive anti-Traveller racism, restricted opportunities for entry into the formal

sector and inadequate state infrastructural support for 'unproductive' Traveller childhoods.

The history and politics of Traveller 'child begging'

I have already mentioned how the lack of official acknowledgement of the ongoing economic activities of Traveller children creates a lacuna in Traveller-related policy and practice, especially in the areas of family planning and schooling. An important exception to this 'blindspot' however, has been the very high degree of attention focused on the activity of 'begging'.

What is striking in fact is the way in which a historical concern with Traveller begging in urban and/or tourist areas has, over time, become increasingly focused on the more specific phenomenon of 'child begging'.

A review of the regional press (the *Connacht Tribune*) and local city council minutes from the 1920s to the 1940s in my fieldwork area of Galway City revealed a long history of outsiders describing Traveller street begging as a 'nuisance' and a threat to the economic interests of the city, particularly its tourist industry. Traveller women, in particular, were commonly prosecuted for begging and frequently received full sentences of one month's imprisonment. In some cases these women argued in court that they had in fact been prosecuted for activities that did not constitute begging, for example, selling prayer books, pictures or ballads – an indication that 'begging' was often difficult to distinguish from other activities.

While the Galway City materials reveal how Traveller begging was problematized, the particular role of children was not highlighted in these sources.

Specific references to 'child begging' in Dublin city centre, however, appeared in the national parliamentary (Dáil) debates of the late 1950s. The emergence of problematized child beggars in national political discourse corresponds with a wider growing political preoccupation with the Traveller (or 'itinerant') 'problem' at this time. Elsewhere (Helleiner, 2000) I have linked the increased problematizing of Travellers in political discourse to the opening up of the Irish economy to global capitalism and a political project of economic and social 'modernization'. (Traveller camps and traveller activities including 'begging' were increasingly construed as inconsistent with, if not an obstacle to, national development)

The itinerant 'problem' was addressed at the national political level through the formation of a Commission on Itinerancy (henceforth CI) in 1960. The resulting *Report of the Commission on Itinerancy* laid out a comprehensive settlement programme aimed at Traveller assimilation. An important premise of the report was that the Traveller economy was eroding and needed to be replaced by mainstream patterns of wage work for men,

full-time housewifery for women and schooling for children. The report contained little recognition of the ongoing economic activities of Travellers and was particularly silent with respect to those of women and children. The only recognition of children's work in the section of the Report devoted to economics, for example, was a reference to the employment of family-based units in agricultural labour (CI, 1963: 72).

Elsewhere, in a section dealing with 'social and ethical behaviour', however, the report highlighted the 'problem' of begging. Here it was noted that: 'most itinerant women and children beg' and that the 'proceeds of begging form a vitally necessary part of the real income of the majority of itinerant families' (CI, 1963: 90). Rather than being viewed as 'work', however, the activity of begging was identified as evidence of the lack of a viable economy and targeted for elimination. In the case of child begging in particular, the report recommended that the provisions in the Children's Act 1908 be better enforced and that Traveller parents should be held liable through amended legislation: 'so that in the case of a child found begging it would be necessary for the parent to prove that he did not send the child to beg' (CI, 1963: 92).⁴ While the legislative reform called for at this time would not be accomplished until the 2001 Children Act discussed below, the issue of enforcement, especially in the summer tourist months, was taken up. The Minister for Justice, for example, indicated that the police were provided with 'special instructions' at the beginning of each tourist season to reduce the 'nuisance' of Traveller street begging. Such instructions yielded prosecutions of 89 adults and 7 juveniles for begging in central Dublin in 1966 (*Dáil Debates*, Haughey, 18 May 1967: col. 1255).

The following year it was suggested by some national politicians that begging children in particular were aggressively 'threatening visitors' (that is, tourists) and thereby creating a national embarrassment (*Dáil Debates*, Briscoe, 18 May 1967: col. 1256). The presence of child beggars in major tourist locations, for example O'Connell Bridge and St Stephen's Green, also prompted calls for increased social services to ensure that children would 'avoid even the appearance of the need to appear as beggars in the street' (*Dáil Debates*, Dillon, 26 March 1968: col. 1036).

Of interest here is the way in which the issue of 'Traveller begging', identified initially with women (or women-and-children), was shifting to a more exclusive focus on Traveller child begging. In 1973 the Minister for Social Welfare was asked to investigate the condition of itinerant families in Dublin since: 'lack of proper means seems to force the children of these families to beg on the city streets' (*Dáil Debates*, Moore, 8 November 1973: col. 1638). Five years later the same politician asked the Ministers for both Health and Education: 'why there are so many children begging in the Dublin streets' (*Dáil Debates*, Moore, 9 November 1978: col. 673). By this time, it was stated that the issue of Traveller children begging in Dublin city centre was 'under review' by various parties (for example, the Eastern

Health Board, Dublin Corporation, Departments of Health and Education, Dublin Committee for Travelling People and the National Council for Travelling People).

The recurring references to 'child begging' in the parliamentary debates may have reflected a demographic shift in response to changing restrictions on the activity. For example, it is possible that the 'crackdown' on adult beggars revealed in figures supplied by Charles Haughey for 1966, had the effect of increasing the participation of unaccompanied children whose begging activities were more difficult to prosecute because of the need to establish parental culpability. A growth in begging by children may also have reflected an increasing impoverishment of young people – other researchers have pointed to the growth of (non-Traveller) youth begging in Britain and linked this to the erosion of the welfare state (Coles and Craig, 1999).

Whether the demographics of begging were actually shifting or not, however, it is clear that a new focus on the plight of begging Traveller children, rather than adults, echoed and supported a wider government policy predicated in part on the identification of Traveller children as being in need of rescue from the Traveller way of life through settlement and assimilation.

In the late 1970s, the issue of begging children was linked by politicians to the issue of child homelessness – a linkage strengthened by discussion of the need for the state to take responsibility for the well-being of Traveller children whose parents were imprisoned or hospitalized. Debates reveal references to the provision of new services including a residential facility for 'homeless children' and a special school and day care for 'children of the more deprived and unsettled travelling people' (*Dáil Debates*, Haughey, 9 November 1978: col. 674, Wilson, 9 November 1978: col. 684).

In 1979, the Minister for Health declared that improving the lives of Traveller children was a major objective for the International Year of the Child (*Dáil Debates*, Haughey, 29 May 1979: col. 1539) and a joint report by Dublin Corporation and the Eastern Health Board addressed the need for services 'for travelling children, particularly those who are begging in the city centre' (*Dáil Debates*, Haughey, 29 May 1979: col. 1539). Additional day care and hostel services were presented as the solutions to the problem (*Dáil Debates*, Haughey, 24 October 1979: col. 672).

While this period marked the development of specific children's services as a response to child begging, the development of a patchwork of programmes for Traveller children in and of the street in Dublin city centre did not address the broader issue of Traveller children's needs within the context of their families and community. The focus on servicing individual child beggars, moreover, deflected attention away from the broader (highly politicized) struggles over the provision of basic services, and especially accommodation (through serviced sites and housing), to Travellers throughout the country. The limited interventions of the late 1970s and

1980s, unsurprisingly, did not result in the disappearance of child beggars and the issue re-appeared as a salient one in the late 1990s.

Child begging, culture and children's rights in the Celtic Tiger

After the recession of the 1980s, Ireland experienced a dramatic economic boom that re-positioned it from being one of the poorer countries of the EU to having an above-average GDP (Nolan, 2001: 29). The fruits of the transformation, however, have been unevenly distributed. A growing gap between rising income levels on the one hand, and more stagnant state transfers on the other, has resulted in Ireland becoming one of the more unequal countries of the EU. Those drawing social welfare payments (a category which includes most Travellers) have become relatively worse off while child poverty rates, in particular, are the highest in the European Union (Nolan, 2001; *Irish Times*, 'Children Still Suffer in Tiger Economy', 29 May 2001).

Within this context of economic growth and increased inequality there has been intensified debate over the issue of Travellers' cultural rights. Advocacy organizations such as Pavee Point and the Irish Traveller Movement have spearheaded mobilization and politicization around Traveller issues, lobbying for legal protection from anti-Traveller racism, an acknowledgement of the legitimacy of Traveller culture and the provision of basic infrastructural supports, for example, serviced camping sites.

The movement for Traveller rights has been paralleled by increased recognition of children's rights as a result of a series of legislative initiatives preceding and following the 1992 Irish ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Ferguson and Kenny, 1995). Advocates for Travellers have, in fact, invoked the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in their efforts to secure cultural rights and basic services for Traveller children (see Pavee Point's submission on the National Children's Strategy February 2000 <<http://www.Paveepoint.ie/submit5.html>>).

At the same time, however, the phenomenon of 'begging children' was repeatedly invoked in parliamentary debates of the 1990s as illustrative of a perceived conflict between Traveller culture and children's rights. Such references were apparent in the debate on the 1995 *Report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community* when the legitimacy of Traveller culture was challenged through references to child begging. One politician, for example, pointed to 'hard core' Traveller families who left their children sitting on O'Connell Bridge all day to earn money (*Dáil Debates*, Burke, 24 April 1996: col. 1075-6), while another noted: 'it is no longer acceptable that a small minority of travellers should send their children out to beg on the side of the street' (*Dáil Debates*, Fitzgerald, 24 April 1996: col. 1089-90).

'Begging children' as exemplars of an alleged conflict between Traveller culture and children's rights also emerged in the context of the 1998 Seanad debate on the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Bill. In this

debate, for example, a speaker who was supportive of the Bill nonetheless voiced concerns that accepting cultural diversity should not extend to impinging on children's (and women's) rights. As an example of the problem he cited the issue of begging children:

... the notion of travellers putting children on the side of the road to beg is worrying and difficult for all of us. It should not be accepted as a cultural issue. The rights of children transcend those kinds of issues. They have a right to be protected. (*Seanad Debates*, Howlin, 17 June 1998: col. 1024)

In the same 1998 debate another speaker claimed that: 'certain aspects' of Traveller culture were an 'anathema to a civilised society . . . such as allowing children out on the streets to beg when they should be in school' (*Seanad Debates*, Mitchell, 17 June 1998, col. 1045).

Such examples, I argue, reveal how the image of the 'begging child' was used as a means to limit, contest or resist Travellers' political claims framed in the language of culture. Through a focus on Traveller adults who were allegedly abusing their children through begging, and the equation of 'child begging' with Traveller culture, rhetorical space was claimed by those uneasy with or resistant to Travellers' rights. 'Begging children' then became an important site from which to deflect the demands of Traveller advocates.

Exploiting children/protecting children: the ISPCC Leanbh Project

The salience of 'begging children' as a social issue in the late 1990s both prompted and was given more impetus by the unprecedented involvement of the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, which launched a special project to monitor and eliminate the phenomenon of street begging children in central Dublin in 1997.

The ISPCC program known as Leanbh ('child') received much of its support from private and corporate donations and produced statistical summaries of 'sightings' of begging children in the city centre. The focus on visibility dovetailed well with political preoccupation with the allegedly negative impact that the sight of such children had on economic interests of the city, especially the tourist trade.

In its 1999/2000 report, the ISPCC described begging children as 'the most marginalized and vulnerable children in our society' and the activity of begging as 'an unacceptable form of child exploitation'. The solutions offered were largely individualized, for example, 'utilisation of the system of child protection, therapeutic intervention and parent education' – the focus being on alleged parental/community pathology rather than structural inequality. Framed in this way, there was little reference to how wider economic, political and social realities produced begging children, or the significance of begging as a form of poor children's work.

By 2000 the ISPCC Leanbh programme claimed its efforts were responsible for a reduction in the number of Traveller children begging but noted an increase in the number of 'foreign national' children (who were identified as Roma children in the subsequent 2001 report). Perhaps because the reduction in begging children was less dramatic than had been hoped, the 2000 and 2001 reports also began to reference external issues such as racism and a lack of supports as factors in the child begging phenomenon (<http://www.ispcc.ie/pr11.htm>).⁵

By 2001 the ISPCC was revisiting the 'solution' of the late 1970s, in its announcement of plans to develop a day care centre to 'offer children a positive immediate alternative to begging' (<http://www.ispcc.ie/pr11.htm>). Plans for a day care centre, however, did not appear to address the needs of the school-aged children, who, according to ISPCC 'slightings', made up the majority of child beggars (http://www.ispcc.ie/ispcc/pr_temp.html).

The ISPCC also stated its intention to 'employ workers from the traveller and Romanian communities to enhance work with families' and to launch a new 'public awareness campaign'. While not without merit, such initiatives represent a limited response to the phenomenon of child begging. In part because of the reluctance to recognize begging as a form of work pursued by the poor and socially excluded when other forms of informal economic activity are limited (Jordan, 1999: 51). It is not clear, for example, how income garnered through children's begging work will be replaced by 'therapeutic interventions' with individuals or families in the absence of new forms of economic support.

As Kenny has pointed out: 'structural explanations for child labor tend to be eclipsed by individual and family interventions' (1999: 382). A similar framing of the issue of child begging is evident in the Irish context.

Criminalizing child begging: the Children Act 2001

While the Leanbh project represents the charitable end of efforts to eliminate 'child begging', new legislative measures are aimed at its elimination through greater criminalization. The Children Act 2001 which lays out a new framework for a juvenile justice system in Ireland includes a section titled 'Child begging' (located within a larger part of the Act relating to 'Child protection'). In this section, substantial fines of £250 for a first offence and £500 for a second are imposed on adults who allow children: 'to be in any street or public place, or to make house to house visits, for the purpose of begging or receiving alms or of inducing the giving of alms (whether or not there is any pretence of singing, performing, offering anything for sale or otherwise)'.

As this wording reveals, the financial penalty is accompanied by a broadening of the definition of what constitutes 'begging' as well as the

spaces from which it is to be eliminated. The definition of 'begging' in this legislation specifically states that the 'pretence' of 'singing, performing, offering anything for sale or otherwise' will not mitigate the identification of this 'crime'. At the same time, the spaces from which child begging is to be eliminated are extensive, that is, 'any street or public place' including 'house to house visits'.

The criminalizing of a broader range of informal economic activities under the rubric of 'begging' as well as the expansion of the geographical spaces from which such activities are to be excluded parallels the 'crack-downs' on begging characteristic of several other Western governments in the 1990s (Dean, 1999).

The legislation also addresses the recommendation of earlier reports by 'reversing' the 'burden of proof' from the prosecution to parents, who are now presumed to have allowed the children to beg 'unless the contrary is proved' (see O'Donoghue, <http://www.irlgov.ie/debates-00/12april/sect2.htm.#kids>.) This emphasis on parental culpability is part of a wider emphasis on 'parental responsibility' and 'parental restitution' for 'out-of-control' children in the legislation as a whole. This thrust parallels similar efforts to 'privatize' responsibility for children in other Western juvenile justice systems.

The legislative reform prompted a response from the Traveller advocacy organization, Pavee Point. In a submission at the committee stage of the Bill, the organization argued that the range of activities being criminalized for the sake of 'child protection' was too broad. What was needed, it argued, was a clear distinction to be drawn between children's involvement in 'door-to-door begging' (or 'call backs') on the one hand, and 'street begging' on the other.

The former it suggested was: 'a traditional form of begging carried out by Travellers for centuries' wherein 'a child accompanies a mother or grandmother' in activities of 'trading, bartering, offering services and begging' with particular families with whom the Travellers have a relationship. In this activity, children were safe with their parents, were building relationships with the settled community and 'engaged in legitimate trade'. By including this activity under the definition of 'child begging', Pavee Point submitted, the legislative reform was not protecting children but rather criminalizing: 'Traveller economy and culture' (see Child Begging vs Call Backs http://www.paveepoint.ie/feb01_f.html).

What is significant in this context about the intervention by Pavee Point was the attempt to construct children's house-to-house begging activities as having both economic and cultural value. Although Pavee Point did not use the language of work or labour, it was drawing attention to how blanket prohibitions, ostensibly for 'child protection', could undermine important forms of activity for both families and communities. The submission by Pavee Point then represented an important attempt to challenge dominant condemnations and repression of 'child begging' by

pointing to its variation as well as constituent social relations and cultural meanings.

In making a distinction between 'child begging' activities that were safe and those that were harmful, Pavee Point's Intervention paralleled international policy and research on children's work. The 2000 ILO Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour, for example, seeks to target for elimination more hazardous forms of children's work rather than all children's work (Smolin, 2000).

In making its case against the criminalization of house-to-house 'child begging', Pavee Point was challenging dominant constructions of children as unproductive and pointing to the importance of non-school forms of learning. In so doing it also implicitly questioned portrayals of traveller children's activities by other organizations. A report on the work of Save the Children in England, for example, referred to Traveller children 'selling carpets door-to-door after school' as an example of the kind of 'child labour' in need of elimination because of its threat to children's educational, physical and psychological development (*Irish Times*, 'The Abuse of Child Labour is an Issue in Britain Too', 23 June 1999). Pavee Point appeared to be challenging such a designation.

At the same time, however, Pavee Point participated in and reproduced dominant ideologies of childhood in condemning street begging while defending house-to-house 'calling'. Central to the distinction between the two forms of work, for instance, was the positing of a mother- (or grand-mother-) child nexus as a 'safe' and non-exploitative context for children's work. Likewise (the establishment of house-to-house begging as legitimate and safe involved a spatial juxtaposition to the more dangerous 'street'). As many others have noted, children in 'the street' are often constructed as out of (appropriate domestic or educational) place as well as out of control and therefore both 'at risk' and 'a risk' (see Stephens, 1995: 13; see also Holloway and Valentine, 2000: 777). The realities of the circumstances of poor children in and of 'the street' however are more complex than this (see Hecht, 1998).

The negative construction of street begging reproduced by Pavee Point also easily echoed the focus of elite concern. While there is a history of popular and political complaint about house calling/begging and its construction as both a 'threat' and a 'nuisance' to householders, this particular activity has received much less attention from politicians than street begging. As I have suggested it is the latter that is consistently constructed as a threat to economic interests.

Pavee Point's attempt to mitigate the impact of the Children Act 2001 was ultimately unsuccessful and, despite the echoing of some dominant discourse as mentioned above, politically risky in the context of political debate that posited an alleged conflict between children's rights and Traveller culture. Intervening in a defence of any form of 'child begging' ran the risk of providing additional ammunition to critics who were already

suggesting that child begging was illustrative of the dangers of providing official recognition of Traveller culture as legitimate or valuable. The fact that it was attempted at all suggests the importance that this form of children's work continues to have for Traveller children and their families.

The new 'child protection' provisions of the Children Act 2001 serves to criminalize many of the economic activities of poor children while providing little in the way of new economic supports. As Pavee Point has pointed out, for example, the latest budget contained inadequate increases in basic social welfare rates, clothing, footwear and child dependent allowances (http://www.paveepoint.ie/feb01_f.html). Paradoxically, the erosion of a social infrastructure mitigates against Traveller children achieving anything close to the ideal model of childhood that motivates charitable and state campaigns against child begging.

As Kenny has pointed out more generally, the premise behind many 'child protection' initiatives vis-a-vis children in the street is to return such children to their 'proper' spheres of home and school. As she points out, however, the homes and school available to such children often do not conform to the imagined safe and protected spaces of middle-class childhoods (1999: 382).

In the case of Traveller children, despite a policy of provision of serviced halting sites and/or housing, the Irish government has not ensured adequate secure and serviced accommodation to Traveller families. The result is that for many Traveller children 'home' is characterized by official state neglect and (sometimes violent) exclusion (for example, through state-sponsored or vigilante evictions). As mentioned, basic services such as water, electricity and sanitation are inadequate or lacking for camping families (who are disproportionately those with young children).

Likewise although the provision of schooling to Traveller children has been a central policy tenet, Traveller children continue to face discriminatory barriers to enrolment as well as exclusionary actions, including racist name calling and other stigmatizing practices (from both children and adults) inside and outside the classroom. Educational structures and curricula often have limited demonstrable relevance to the lives of Traveller students and, in many cases, school attendance has not eliminated the need for children's economic contributions to their families with the result that school-aged children may face a 'double day' of school and family work.

Conclusion

In a recent article, my colleagues and I argued that anthropology can offer documentation of the processes (across time and place) that produce unequal and diverse childhoods and in so doing, provide a much needed and politically important challenge to the often essentialized and universalized "childhood" constructed through dominant discourse and practice.

(Helleiner et al., 2001: 136). This article points to the need to critically examine debates and policy initiatives surrounding poor and marginalized children's work.

Nieuwenhuys (1996) points to the 'paradox' that the moral condemnation of children's labour assumes that children's proper place is one of dependency and passivity, yet, as she points out, creating such a position for children depends upon the flow of entitlements from states – many of which are retrenching. Despite the contemporary 'sanctity' of the child, she argues that the current context is one of a relative decline in state investment in the programmes and institutions that support the ideally domesticated and unproductive characteristics of modern childhood.

In the case of Travellers the promise of 'child saving' and/or child protection has been rhetorically central to policy and practice but there has been little serious engagement with the realities of many Traveller children's lives, including their significant economic roles within their families and wider community. The highlighting and criminalizing of 'child begging' feeds racist stigmatizing of Travellers and legitimates further exclusion and/or intrusive regulation while basic needs are denied. The ironies and tragedy of working childhoods in the context of the Celtic Tiger are exemplified by the fact that Traveller children and their parents face increased condemnation (and the threat of heavy financial penalty) for failing to meet a standard of 'unproductive' childhood that is unachievable within the context of inadequate supports.)

Notes

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- 1 The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, especially article 32, and the ILO Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour (No. 182), passed in November 2000, exemplify these trends. A history and a critique of the latter Convention is found in Smolin (2000).
- 2 Analysis of 1987 Traveller census data revealed an infant mortality rate of 18.1 per 1000 compared to the national figure of 7.4 per 1000. The high mortality rate combined with the ongoing economic contributions of Traveller children partially explains a relatively high fertility rate for Travellers (for example, in 1987 164.2 per 1000 compared with 70.1 per 1000 for the general Irish population) (Barry et al., 1989, cited in Task Force on the Travelling Community, 1995: 135).
- 3 For further information on the fieldwork conducted at this time see Helleiner (2000).
- 4 The 1963 *Report of the Commission on Itinerancy* included the suggestion that the practice of Traveller begging was one of the greatest sources of 'hostility on the part of the settled population' (CI, 1963: 90). The report recommended

providing assistance to make up for the income derived from begging, and also asked the public to be less 'indiscriminate' in alms giving. It also called for existing laws to be more strictly enforced and penalties increased – particularly for street begging and in tourist areas.

- 5 The annual reports provide statistical counts of 'sightings' of begging children along with estimates of the number of families with children involved, and the actual number of begging children. While 'sightings' ran into the thousands, in 1998 Leabh claimed that only 40 families and approximately 150 children were involved (*Irish Times*, 23 October 1998; see <http://scripts.ireland.com/search/highl...h=/newspaper/ireland/1998/1023/hom8.htm>). The 2001 report repeated the figure of 40 families, but recorded a decrease in 'incidences' (or 'sightings') of begging children from 2938 in 1999/00 to 1766 in 2000/01. Leabh claimed that it had provided 'therapeutic help' to 28 families in 1999/00. In 2000/01 it claimed that 26 of the children that it had worked with in the previous year had not returned to begging. It also stated that an additional 18 children had stopped begging in 2000/01 due to its intervention.

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